

Notes on Hosea

Hosea was among the last writing prophets sent to turn Israel back, preaching just after Jonah and around the same time as Amos. Israel's chief sins at the time were the idolatry introduced by Jeroboam I and mistreatment of the poor and righteous.

Jeroboam II ruled Israel in a time of great prosperity. Therefore, it should've been a time of great gratitude and generosity. But instead, the wealthy and powerful used their position to oppress and prey on those with less.

Israel was arrogant, but judgment was looming on the horizon. Jonah had been reluctant to preach to Nineveh, because Assyria was quickly becoming the biggest political threat to the region. Israel's enmity with Syria was turning into an alliance of necessity, as Syria was the sole buffer between Israel and the Assyrian Empire.

The Assyrians were famous for their cruelty in conquest. They besieged capitals and fortified cities, using starvation to conquer. They slaughtered without pity. They put hooks into the mouths of captives, chained the hooks together in a line, and led the captives away in humiliation and pain. They put out the eyes of the kings they conquered. They scattered and mixed exiled populations to reduce revolts. This was the punishment in store for Israel.

Like Isaiah (20), Ezekiel (4; 5; 12; 24), and Jeremiah (13; 19; 27), Hosea was commanded to live out a parable of Israel's unfaithfulness to God. In a common metaphor, their idolatry was like adultery. Hosea was to take a prostitute as a wife and bear children with meaningful names reflecting God's displeasure.

Hosea's address to the nations around Israel was as much a warning to Israel as to those nations. The cluster of nations neighboring Israel, especially Syria, provided a false sense of security. One by one, they fell to Assyria. The only one that wouldn't be conquered completely was Judah, and even they'd be subjected and pay tribute.

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While Judah would be offered hope of preservation and restoration by its prophets, Israel was given no such hope. They were told they would “not rise again” after their fall. The only positive points in Hosea’s message reached far into the future to the Messiah. The citizens of Israel would fall into three categories in the centuries after the fall. Those remaining in the land would become the ethnically mixed Samaritans. Some moved to Judah during Hezekiah’s reign. Those exiled abroad would become members of the Dispersion. In terms of national citizenship, they were Gentiles. But when the descendant of David came, salvation would reach even those faraway lands.

Hosea is frequently quoted in the New Testament for a variety of points. Hosea is the longest book of the Minor Prophets by Hebrew word count, followed by Zechariah and Amos. The prophet’s book contains messages spanning four kings of Judah, who reigned in the eighth century BC, and Jeroboam II of Israel, who reigned from about 781 to 753 BC. The beginning of the prophet’s work is often dated to Jeroboam’s latter years, around 755 BC. Hosea’s career probably spanned about 30 years, ending in the early years of Hezekiah’s reign in Judah and just a few years before the fall of Samaria (721 BC).